

News Release

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UDOH Uncovers Increase in Unintentional Overdose Deaths in Utah due to Prescription Narcotics

(Salt Lake City, UT) – In a Utah Department of Health (UDOH) study that will be released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*, Utah was shown to have experienced a large increase in deaths due to drug poisoning.

Overall:

Yearly deaths from drug poisoning in Utah increased nearly 5-fold, from 79 deaths in 1991 to 391 deaths in 2003. This increase was the result of two problems with legal and illegal drugs.

Illegal:

Deaths from illegal drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, increased between 1991 and 1999, from 19 to 120 deaths per year. After 1999, deaths from illegal drugs decreased somewhat to 92 in 2003.

Legal:

From 1999 through 2003, a larger increase occurred in deaths due to drugs that can be obtained by prescription (referred to as non-illicit or legal drugs), such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, and methadone. These deaths were classified as unintentional or that the intent couldn't be determined, indicating they were not thought to be suicide. The deaths caused by use of prescription drugs increased 4-fold between 1999 and 2003, from 45 to 181 deaths per year.

This study titled, "Increase in Poisoning Deaths Caused by Non-Illicit Drugs – Utah, 1991-2003," performed by the UDOH, had some unexpected findings. Christy Peterson-Porucznik, UDOH epidemiologist, who led the study, said, "Society believes that drug overdose deaths happen to people using illegal drugs. In Utah, the reality is that the typical person dying of drug poisoning is a young to middle-aged overweight adult who

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was using drugs that can be obtained by prescription." Surprisingly, the problem occurred in both rural and urban areas of Utah, and affected both men and women.

"Non-illicit drug deaths are preventable. We are working to discover ways to reduce the number of drug poisoning deaths in Utah. These prescription drugs are commonly used and can help people, but they need to be used appropriately, safely and as directed," said Dr. Robert Rolfs, Utah State Epidemiologist, UDOH.

Future UDOH studies in this area will focus on identifying risk characteristics that would help predict which people are most at risk of dying from a drug overdose and help guide interventions to reduce the risk.

*The CDC publication that references this study is called Morbidity Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR). Copies are posted on the CDC website on Fridays at http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/mmwr wk.html.

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